

Editorial

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Postprint / Postprint

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

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Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Baldwin, L. P. (2008). Editorial. *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 9(2), 99-102. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1469787408090837>

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Editorial

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The ‘traditional’ learning environment has until recent years been the classroom. The advent of computing technology has led us to think beyond the four walls and, quite literally, to think ‘outside the box’ as to how we, as educators, can assist our learners, whether face-to-face or not. Space, and the creation and use of it in order to foster and/or improve our communication both with our learners and between ourselves, is a core theme which links the articles which comprise this issue.

There has been an increase in the number of institutional repositories in institutions across the world, although the majority of these repositories are devoted to research output, say Melanie King et al., authors of ‘Analysis of academic attitudes and existing processes to inform the design of teaching and learning material depositories: a user-centred approach’, the first article in this issue. Arguing that repositories for teaching material are less common, their study identifies existing practice(s) in how these are created and used, and demonstrates that there is confusion about how a repository is different from a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). As they rightly say, if we share our resources and expertise, this may not only give us access to material but also potentially improve our own teaching practices. Such repositories are usually Open Access (OA), they say, in contrast to a VLE, where access is limited or authenticated to particular groups. Their study reveals that which is likely common in the sector, in the UK at least, namely, that all educators used their university’s VLE in order to make available to students the teaching materials that they had prepared. Not all, however, did this without the help or support of administrative and/or technical staff, and there were differing views on their creation of material and how they carried out the task. A significant majority of educators expressed the view that they would like to make better use of the technology at their disposal but that they lacked the skills and/or time to do so. The article shows the different stages of the teaching material workflow and the different levels of communication, support and technology needed at each. As is likely the case in other institutions too, it seems that we rely far more on informal rather than formal methods for communicating and sharing, and that the ‘network’ is not limited to merely those teaching in the classroom. Their study provides some detailed and helpful guidance by

way of presenting some scenarios as to how, for example, an institutional teaching repository would inter-work with existing institutional systems, the benefit of repositories inter-working with existing applications, and the amount and kind of support needed in order to share materials with others. Concluding that we have an opportunity to put into a repository materials that are not necessarily suitable for a VLE or another institutional system, the authors offer up the intriguing area for possible future research, namely, how (or whether) national and institutional repositories might fit together, including the social mechanisms we would need for sharing materials.

Echoing the theme of different learning environments, Tim Montgomery, author of the second article, entitled 'Space matters: experiences of managing static formal learning spaces', argues that our seminar rooms are far more than mere walls and furniture, and that seminar space is contingent. We, as educators, work in spaces that have long remained unchanged yet, argues the author, we need to better understand it as the management of space and movement impacts our learners' construction of meaning and the dynamic of learning itself. Whether or not we work in a higher education context in which there are different learning goals and expectations, and thus a need for a different learning environments, the author posits that we are being urged to move away from our everyday experience, that is, one which is characterized as not being high-tech and which does not have impressively designed formal and informal spaces. This article looks at the realities of learning space and why space matters. As the literature cited in the article rightly says, space is not static, absolute or devoid of effects or implications; it is inextricably linked with social relations which have in themselves an integral dynamism. Three dimensions are discussed. One, the group (of students and tutor), which is a social organization that has, and creates, its own meanings. Two, the movements within the space, as these partly underlie those interactions and are also socially constructed sources of meaning. Three, the space itself. Space, says the literature, is negotiated, and is not value-neutral; it is about position, geographically, temporally, and politically. For us, as educators, this impacts our understandings of ourselves and our learners, and the dynamic nature of this relationship affects how topics are treated and how the process of learning occurs. The author reports that there is a growing consensus that there should be a harmony of space and learning; not easy if, as the author notes, we are currently working with our learners in static, 'undesirable' learning spaces. This fascinating and often overlooked aspect of learning makes for interesting reading.

The relationship between educators and learners is also the topic of the third article. Vital to any new relationship is how it begins, as this is where

expectations can quickly turn to disappointment if these are not realized. In their article entitled 'Fostering approachability and classroom participation during the first day of class: evidence for a reciprocal interview activity', Anthony D. Hermann and David A. Foster, from Willamette University, Oregon and Western Oregon University, respectively, look at the engaging and engagement (or not) of students who are just beginning their studies at university. Saying that although there may be some discipline-specific activities which comprise what happens on day one, the authors say that, regardless of discipline, much of the first or early days are about the fostering of suitably positive interpersonal relationships between educators and learners. However, the authors cite evidence that suggests that learners perceive the first class to have little impact, as they are, understandably, more concerned with the practicalities of surviving in a new environment. Indeed, our attempts at fostering good rapport and active participation on day one may, they say, serve only to frustrate learners, as this is at odds with what they want and need to do on day one. The article describes an activity, adapted from that used to demonstrate effective communication between employers and employees during an initial employment interview, which may satisfy the goals of both educator and learner equally, regardless of class size. The findings suggest that this activity assists learners in finding out (more) about their preferences, attitudes, and knowledge about the course of study on which they are about to embark and, to the surprise of the authors, leads to a shift of attitude within the space of only an hour or so. Not only have learners responded favourably, they say, but so too have educators, who are given a valuable opportunity to learn more about their learners, and from day one. The activity can be adapted for any classroom, regardless of discipline, and the authors provide us with the tools to try it for ourselves.

Continuing the theme of those learners who are new to higher education, the fourth article, by Isabelle D. Cherney from Creighton University, Omaha, looks at whether or how memory or level of understanding of material introduced at the start of the learners' studies might differ from those later on in their studies. In the article, entitled 'The effects of active learning on students' memories for course content', discussion of the literature entails a focus on theories related to levels of processing, memory, recall and attention, amongst others. As is the case for most of us, the memory of our learners is not as brilliant as we/they would hope, it seems. What learners (and anyone else) recall or remember is in part determined by the medium through which data is first encountered; activities, videos or that which is atypical is more easily 'stored' than, say, the typical 'impoverished' lecture. This raises the issue of what has for some time been the subject of much research in the field of education, namely, learning styles.

Whatever the learning style of an individual learner, our task as educators is made all the more difficult, as the author recognizes, when teaching large classes. 'Large' for some is 'small' to others, but in a class of, say, 600 or so, and teaching those learners new to the university environment and to the discipline, however 'active' we may wish their learning to be, we face particular challenges. In order to find out whether learners' processing differs between various course levels, and how these levels correspond or not to course understanding (as measured by grade attained on assessment), the article reports a study designed to measure the extent to which students remembered certain concepts. Results from the study show that active learning materials were more easily recalled, and this was the case at both introductory and higher levels. The more learners could relate the material directly to their own personal experience, or experiences of those close to them, the better their recall.

Engagement and relationship-building is the subject of the fifth and final article, although this concerns not the relationship between educators and learners but instead our own perceptions of a key aspect of higher education, namely, assessment. In this article, entitled 'Summative and formative assessment: perceptions and realities', Maddalena Taras sought to uncover our perceptions of whether summative assessment is a product or a process, whether self-assessment is a summative or formative type of assessment and whether formative assessment can be used for the purposes of marking/grading. Tensions, says Taras, between formative and summative assessment functions exist, despite these being neither separate nor fixed. Citing literature providing a theory of formative assessment and feedback, Taras argues that there has been no explicit examination of the relationship between formative and summative assessment and that we, the educators, need to better understand this if we are to help our learners in their learning and to assess the results of that learning. Using data collected from 50 lecturers/educators, results show that many were unsure of what is meant by summative, formative and self-assessment and they were similarly unclear when it came to understanding the relationship between these. Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, feedback was not perceived as being a distinguishing feature of formative assessment, despite the literature cited claiming that it is a central feature of it. Given that formative assessment is regarded as a 'good thing', it is heartening to see, says the author, that formative assessment was much used, demonstrating their desire to use assessment as a means of supporting their learners' learning. As Taras says, assessment is not only a vital aspect in education but also a complex one, and there is still much that we must do in order to better understand assessment, both formative and summative.